LITHUANIA

ANCIENT LITHUANIA

Long before the Christian Era, the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea were inhabited by a branch of Indo-Europeans known to the ancient world as Aistians. They were quite different from their Germanic and Slavic neighbors. They spoke a tongue which is akin to Sanscrit. Philologists have said that even today Lithuanian is perhaps the nearest to the language the original Indo-Europeans spoke.

The Aistians lived in separate clans and tribes and were a people of hunters, fishers and farmers. Old chronicles describe them as industrious, peaceful, and hospitable, and say that they were a humane people. The Aistians were a pagan folk, greatly attached to their religion. They worshiped the forces of nature; they had no idols, no blood sacrifices. Their only temples were oak groves where, on stone altars, white-robed priestesses tended the sacred fire. They venerated their high priest as the wisest man in the land. The Aistian woman was equal to the man: she was his true helpmate: his steadfast friend, trusted counselor and co-worker, and in case of dire need, his co-warrior.

A tenacious people in all respects, the Aistians — later differentiated as Borussians (Old-Prussians), Letts, and Lithuanians — were still pagans in the XIII-th century, long after the rest of Europe was Christian.

The Aistians had trade relations with Greece from the V-th century B. C. They exchanged their honey, wax, furs, and amber — the "northern gold" so much prized by the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians — for the metals of the southern

peoples. Excavations of grave mounds prove that at the beginning of the Christian Era the Aistians had good farming implements, fine weapons and ornaments, and well-woven clothes of linen and wool.

Isolated by their primeval forests and nearly impassable marshes, the Aistians lived for long centuries in relative peace, practically untouched by the great folk-migrations. If attacked, they could fight fiercely and effectively, as Scandinavian and Slav raiders found out. In the XI-th and XII-th centuries, Slav princes tried to Christianize them by force and failed utterly.

MEDIEVAL LITHUANIA

The real troubles of the Borussians, Letts, and Lithuanians began in the XIII-th century. Hitherto attacked chiefly by Slavs or Scandinavians, it was now the turn of the Germans. Teutonic Knights, home from the Crusades, decided they would Christianize these people willy-nilly, and incidentally, acquire valuable territory. They were joined by other restless knights from Western Europe and two hundred years of terrible, unceasing, warfare began. It was truly baptism by fire and sword — not by the word of God.

It took the highly independent pagans a long time to realize that they must unite or perish. Only after their western brethren, the Borussians, had been practically wiped out, and their northern brethren, the Letts, almost overrun, did the central Lithuanians unite under one of their ablest leaders, Mindaugas, as king. In 1251, Mindaugas, together with many of his people, became Christian and Lithuania was on the way toward becoming a Christian nation. The pretext for conquest was gone but the German attacks continued. The Church pronounced interdict after interdict against the Teutonic Orders — all in vain. Disillusioned, most of Lithuania returnes to paganism.

Ceaselessly attacked by the Germans in the west, the Lithuanians now began to be harrassed by Slavs and Tartars in the east. But the once peaceful Lithuanians were now inured to war and they formed a strong defensive organization which was a match for their enemies. They stabilized their western borders as best they could, and, repulsing their enemies in the east, expanded their borders until, in the XIV-th and XV-th cen-